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## Using the Film, *Whale Rider* to Facilitate Learners' Ability to Analyze Symbols and Irony in English Literature

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Given the myriad distractions vying for the attention of first year university students and the decline in reading rates among Japanese youth, it is not surprising that many students find it difficult to delve below the surface of a text in order to grasp the subtleties of meaning and recognize broader, underlying themes inherent in a work of English literature. Reading between the lines to gain an appreciation of the deeper meaning of words and actions and understanding the concepts represented by symbols in a novel require reflection, introspection and creative thinking. While learners may have relatively little difficulty in describing the more superficial elements of a story such as the setting, characters, conflict, or climax, recognizing and analyzing the significance of symbols and irony in a work of fiction can prove a more challenging endeavor. In order to provide scaffolding to simplify the process, students do an activity that integrates content from the film, *Whale Rider* and structured practice in the form of a four-part task involving symbols and irony in the film. The task serves as preparation for the analysis of symbols and irony in book reports about the novels that students read in first-year English courses.

### **Rationale**

In required, integrated skills courses, English majors describe the plot and analyze literary elements, including setting, narrative style, theme, characters, conflict, climax, symbols, and irony for book reports about

four novels that they read over two semesters. Descriptions of these literary elements are included in a student guide used in the first and second semester courses. Below are the entries for *symbol* and *irony* as they appear in the student guide.

**Symbol** (象 徵 *shouchou*) is a person, object, or event in the story, which, stands for another thing, a person, or an idea (Strong 17).

**Irony** is when something unexpected is presented to the reader, either

- (a) an unexpected event/outcome in a story that somehow is fitting; or
- (b) a use of words in an opposite way to their usual meaning (皮肉 *hiniku*) (Strong 17).

Examples and practice activities to facilitate learners' understanding of the literary elements, along with sample book reports, are also included in the student guide. However, many students have difficulty analyzing symbols and irony in the novels that they read. For example, in book reports, any unexpected event or outcome in a story may be described as irony. In some cases, abstract concepts such as "happiness" or "friendship" may be identified as symbols. In other cases, students correctly identify symbols but neglect to tell what they represent or to explain their relevance in the story.

To provide additional practice in recognizing and analyzing symbols and irony prior to writing their first book reports, students watch selected scenes from the film, *Whale Rider* and work in teams to identify and explain the significance of symbols and irony in the story. Before describing the task in more detail, let's consider certain elements related to Maori cultural and historical traditions that appear in the film and are relevant to the task.

### Maori cultural and historical traditions

#### *Whales*

Whales figure predominately in many aspects of Maori cultural and historical traditions. This is evidenced by the fact that whales were often depicted in carved sculptures on the gables of houses and the bargeboards of tribal meetinghouses. Whales provided food and utensils and were also used for weaponry and ornamentation. Interactions between people and whales appear in many myths, legends and tribal traditions. For example, whales guided and protected ancestors' canoes on their journeys to *Aoteroa*, the name used by early settlers to New Zealand (Buck 328).

#### *Canoe*

Maori genealogy originates from the canoe chief, who was also the tribal chief, and the other members of the original crew from the same tribe who came to settle in New Zealand. The canoe became a revered symbol of the tribe, and the name of the canoe was often mentioned along with the tribal chief's name when reciting the genealogy of a tribe or family (Beazley 22-23).

#### *Taiaha*

A *taiaha* is a wooden club, approximately 1.5 meters in length, used in a traditional martial art form practiced by the Maori. The *taiaha* has a flat, pointed blade, which can be intricately carved on both sides. According to Buck, the *taiaha* was sometimes "embellished with a fringe of tufts of white dog hair and a cuff of red parrot feathers so that it rose in social status to become both weapon and staff to chiefs" (277).

#### *Whale teeth*

The teeth of sperm whales, commonly referred to as "whale ivory,"

were the most prized material used for ornamentation throughout Polynesia, and were used as breast ornamentation by early settlers of New Zealand (Buck 283). "The *rei puta* (*rei*, whale ivory; *puta*, hole) was a valuable ornament made by cutting away a portion of the tooth to form a flat surface extending to the root end. Three holes usually were pierced at the root or upper end for attachment to a neck cord" (Buck 287-288).

#### *Whale riders*

Many Maori myths and legends feature whale riders. Some involve pet whales such as *Tinirau's Tutunui* (Grey 69-76). Others include tales of rescue, for example, *Tutarakauika's* rescue of a powerful priest from a volcanic island (Reed 239-241). One such tale, as told by C.O. Davis in *Maori Mementos*, is the story of two brothers, *Tuteamoamo*, the elder, and *Waihuka*, whose wife, *Hineitekakara*, was very beautiful. *Tuteamoamo*, who was envious of his brother and coveted his wife, plotted to kill him. When the two went fishing, *Waihuka* was abandoned at sea by his older brother and left to perish. However, a whale rescued him and carried him back to shore, where he rejoined his wife who had come to search for his body (Smith 439-440).

#### *Story of Paikea*

The story of *Paikea* is well known and dates back to about 1000 A.D., according to Colenso (26). *Uenuku* was a tribal chief and father to many sons, including *Paikea*. However, *Ruatapu*, an illegitimate son, was envious of his elder brothers and plotted to kill them. He bore a hole in the bottom of a new canoe, then plugged the hole and covered it with wooden chips. When he and his brothers took the canoe far out to sea, he unplugged the hole and drowned his brothers one-by-one, until only he and *Paikea* were left. However, *Paikea* repeatedly managed to evade him, and finally, *Ruatapu* drowned. *Paikea* was carried back to shore, at Whāngārā, on the East Coast of New Zealand (Colenso 17-23). A carving

on the bargeboard of the meetinghouse at Whāngārā depicts the ancestor, *Paikea* riding a whale. (Appendix 1 contains an excerpt from the story of *Paikea*.)

Each of these elements related to Maori cultural and historical traditions is interwoven in the plot of Witi Ihimaera's novel, *The Whale Rider*, and appears in the film, which involves a small Maori community living on the East Coast of New Zealand. Each element plays an integral role in the story and is relevant to the task described herein. Prior to completing the task, students watch several scenes from the film that reveal the relevance of these elements to the plot.

#### **Synopsis of key elements of the plot**

The story takes place in and around Whāngārā, and the meetinghouse there is featured in the film. As mentioned above, the carving of the whale rider on the bargeboard symbolizes the tribal leader, *Paikea*, and the main characters in the story are his descendants. One of them, a young girl, of the same name, called Pai, has a keen interest in Maori customs and cultural traditions. When she asks her grandfather, the village leader, about their ancestors from *Hawaiki*, he compares them to the strands in a rope that he is holding. "Weave together the threads of *Paikea* so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors, all joined together and strong."

Pai's father, initially groomed to become the next leader, had begun building a traditional tribal canoe, but later abandoned it and moved to Europe to pursue his passion for art. His younger brother, the next in line, became skilled at using a *taiaha*, in his youth. He distinguished himself as a champion in the discipline, but later lost interest in assuming the responsibility of tribal leader. When Pai's twin brother died at birth, her grandfather became determined to find a new leader among the boys in the village.

For this purpose, he establishes a sacred school of learning in the



meetinghouse and assembles a select group of boys to train them in the qualities of a chief. Pai wishes to take part in the training sessions but is shunned by her grandfather. When the training is finished, Pai's grandfather takes the boys out in a boat and instructs them in their final challenge. As he removes a *rei puta* from around his neck and throws it into the water, he declares, "If you have the tooth of a whale, you must have the whale's jaw to wield it." The one who retrieves the *rei puta* will be the new leader. However, one of the boys cannot swim, another has a cold, and the other four return empty-handed. Confronted with this apparent failure, the grandfather becomes dejected. The following day, Pai and her uncle go out to the same spot, and Pai dives in to try to find the *rei puta*, for her grandfather. She returns with it, and her uncle gives it to his mother. However, she refrains from returning it to her husband, feeling that the news may deepen his despair.

That evening, a pod of whales is found beached on the shore, and the community works night and day attempting to save them. Together they try to get the leader of the pod back out to sea so that the other whales will follow, but their efforts are in vain. Pai's grandfather witnesses the crisis unfolding but is powerless to contain it. Finally, they resign themselves to the loss of the pod and go back to shore.

Unseen by the others, Pai goes into the water and climbs upon the back of the whale. Straddling it, she clutches a large barnacle on its back and gives a few kicks, as one would a horse, urging it to go back out to sea. When it does, she is in for the ride of her life, some of it underwater.

Meanwhile, on the shore, Pai's grandmother notices that Pai is missing and calls out to her. When her uncle realizes that the lead whale has gone back out to sea, the villagers turn and see Paikēa on its back. At this point, Pai's grandmother returns the *rei puta* to her husband, who asks which one of the boys found it. She looks at him in disbelief, incredulous at his inability to grasp what is now apparent to all. When the whale is far out to sea, Paikēa, satisfied that the pod has been saved, releases her grasp and disappears beneath the waves.

After she is found and has regained consciousness, her grandfather apologizes for his error in judgment and recognizes her as a leader. Later, her father returns home to complete work on the tribal canoe, and Paikea, along with family members and other villagers set out on its maiden voyage. Thus, a crisis of leadership is averted and the community is united.

#### **Description of the task**

After viewing relevant scenes from the film in class, students work in teams of three to four to identify the main characters, describe their relationships to one another, and summarize key elements of the plot. Then, students watch the final segment of the film outside of class. (This is on reserve in the media center and can be viewed individually or with one to three other student(s).) After viewing the film, students complete a written task for homework, in preparation for a class activity. They may choose to confer with other team members prior to writing their responses. (A copy of the task is included in Appendix 2.)

The written task contains four parts. First, students explain the significance of the leadership challenge: "If you have the tooth of a whale, you must have the whale's jaw to wield it." Next, students tell what the whale tooth symbolizes in the story. Third, students find another symbol in the story and tell what it represents. Finally, they give an example of irony in the film and explain its significance within the context of the story. Students have two weeks to view the film and complete the homework assignment.

In the following class, students discuss their responses to each part of the assignment with other team members. Then each member prepares to report his/her team's response(s) about one part of the assignment to the whole group in a class discussion. Various symbols and examples of irony in the film are noted in the following section. Ones that are not reported by any of the groups can be listed on the board for students to brainstorm in their teams for further discussion.



### Observations

Students generally enjoy the film and can relate to the story because it is an adventure involving young people in a coming of age tale, which takes place on an island in the Pacific. Moreover, the film deals with themes that are relevant to young people, including the generation gap, gender roles, alienation, spirituality, and tradition vs. modernization. The story is rich in both symbols and irony. The vivid imagery and rich symbolism inherent in elements of Maori cultural heritage featured in the film simplifies learners' task of identifying and describing various symbols in the story. Some examples of symbols in the film that students have identified through this process are shown below.

- The carving of the whale rider atop the meetinghouse in the film symbolizes the ancestor, *Paikea*, a tribal leader.
- A whale rider symbolizes someone possessing the attributes of a Maori leader.
- The *rei puta*, or whale tooth, is a symbol of a leader's status or position within the tribe.
- The name, *Paikea* is both a reference to Pai's ancestor and a symbol of her destiny to become a leader.
- *Paikea's* finding the whale tooth, along with her ability to "wield the whale's jaw" and ride it back out to sea reveal her destiny as a leader.
- The threads of a rope symbolize ancestors, separate individuals, joined by tribal lineage, and strengthened by their connection to one another.
- A miniature representation of a golf club is used to symbolize a *taiaha* on a statue awarded to Pai's uncle.
- The beached head whale symbolizes a crisis of leadership, a reflection of Pai's grandfather's condition due to his inability to find a new leader.

- The beached pod of whales reflects a crisis within the Maori community, at risk of losing their cultural heritage without a leader to ensure its preservation.
- Paikea's act of bravery in saving the beached whales signifies the fulfillment of her destiny.
- The completion of the canoe and its maiden voyage symbolize a unification of the Maori community and a renewed interest in preserving Maori cultural traditions.

By going through the process of identifying various symbols in the film with other team members, it becomes apparent to students that a symbol is not an abstract concept, but rather a person, object, or event. Similarly, by explaining the significance of these symbols and their relevance to the story, students gain practice in describing the person, thing, or idea that each symbol represents.

In addition to identifying and describing the significance of various symbols in the story, students can easily grasp two examples of irony in the film. First, it is ironic that Pai's grandfather is committed to finding a new leader, and yet, due to his limiting beliefs, he is unable to recognize the qualities of a leader in Pai, though they live in the same household and interact with one another on a daily basis. Second, the irony of Pai's finding the whale tooth and completing the leadership challenge, despite having been excluded from the training sessions, is easy for students to grasp.

The way in which an unexpected event or outcome is fitting or appropriate in the context of a story is often difficult for learners' to recognize and/or explain. However, it is simple for students to understand how both of these examples of irony are fitting in the context of the film. Pai's completing the leadership challenge by finding the *rei puta* is fitting as it reveals her destiny as a leader. Moreover, it causes her grandfather to recognize his error in judgment and acknowledge her role as leader. Given his position as leader in the Maori community, it is fitting

that the new leader be one of his descendants.

These are examples of symbols and irony in the film that students have considered in the process of completing the four-part task described herein. Since introducing this task, there have been noticeable improvements in learners' ability to accurately identify and describe the significance of symbols and irony in book reports about the English novels that they choose to read. For example, there are fewer instances of students' misidentifying abstract concepts as symbols, identifying symbols without explaining their relevance to the story, or misidentifying unexpected events or outcomes as examples of irony.

### **Conclusion**

Recognizing and analyzing the significance of symbols and irony in English novels can be a challenging endeavor for first-year university students. The task described herein, integrates content from the film, *Whale Rider* and provides practice in recognizing and analyzing the significance of symbols and irony in the story. Rich symbolism from Maori cultural and historical traditions featured in the film serves to simplify the task of identifying and describing various symbols in the story. In addition, the irony of the plot is readily apparent and easy for students to understand. Moreover, it is relatively simple for students to explain why a particular unexpected event or outcome is fitting or appropriate within the context of the story. This structured practice activity serves as preparation for the analysis of symbols and irony in book reports that students write for first-year integrated skills courses. Since implementing this task, there has been noticeable improvement in learners' ability to accurately identify and describe the significance of symbols and irony in the novels that they read. Moreover, ongoing feedback from students indicates that they enjoy the film and find the task to be beneficial.

### Appendices

#### Appendix 1: *Story of Paikea* (excerpt)

In a presentation made at the Hawke's Bay Philosophical Institute in 1881, Colenso recounted the story of *Paikea*, including a chant used to ensure his safe return to shore. (The first seven verses are quoted below.)

1. Now shall be shown, now revealed, the vigor of the trembling heart; now shall be known the force of the anxious heart; now shall be seen the strength of the fluttering weak female heart.

2. The big fish of the sea swims fleetly through strenuous exertion; blowing forth the blasts of sea-water from (its) nostrils; the big fish is lifted above the waters.

3. Space makes (it) buoyant; Sky upheaves (it) above the swell of Ocean.

4. Now, rushing forwards, a steep descent; anon (as if) climbing the fence of a fort! now a roughening squall of wind comes on; anon, as a bird's feather borne before it!

5. Ha! ha! thy heart (even as, or one with) my heart.

6. Now the great enduring courageous heart of (the descendant from the) Sky, shall make itself to emerge through all difficulties and dangers to the habitable, to dwellings (of) light.

7. A full deliverance (for the) son of a chief, who was properly begotten the son of a chief. (Colenso 20-21)

**Appendix 2: Symbols & Irony in *Whale Rider***

Watch the final segment of the film, *Whale Rider* and answer the following questions.

1) What is the significance of the quote below?

“If you have the tooth of a whale, you must have the whale’s jaw to wield it.”

2) What does the whale tooth symbolize in the story?

3) What is another symbol in the story, and what does it represent?

4) What is an example of irony in the film? Explain its significance in the context of the story.

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